

Chapter 5

The value of postdigital humans as objects, or subjects, in McDonaldised Society

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Abstract

Postdigital human encounters could be said to take shape differently depending on how they are either subjectively valued, or objectively evaluated. Digital technologies and humans are now intimately intertwined with shared and sometimes equal capabilities to perform human tasks. Yet still it may be argued that different disciplinary identities prevent computing and the humanities from being thought of as equivalent. Over many decades, humans and computers have been objectively evaluated in McDonaldised society, via rational language and measures where computing techniques are simply applied to improve productivity. Since the Covid-19 lockdown people have described more personal and subjective digital encounters from their homes, with their virtual identities growing as their physical presence has diminished. This chapter speculates on whether new postdigital positionalities are emerging that might finally challenge more dominant, rational interpretations of what computing means in individual lives. If so, perhaps a more subjective analysis of these new forms of postdigital participation will bring the humanities into computing, instead of vice versa. This could help to reveal the unique positionality in each individual postdigital human encounter, where subjective self-description may now be seen to be more appropriate than objective rationality.

Keywords

postdigital, human, positionality, McDonaldisation, rationality, objective, subjective

Introduction

A key question surrounding postdigital humans concerns how humans might be either ‘valued’ or ‘evaluated’ and according to what measure. For Steve Fuller, ‘human’ is a normative category concerning what ‘self-described’ humans decide to include, or exclude (Fuller and Jandric, 2018). As such, Fuller suggests we might reach agreement about the performance standards that a putative ‘human’ should meet that a ‘non-human’ does not meet. Others though point to how the identity of a human is constructed differently across different disciplinary fields. As Mark Poster (1990) observed, the discipline of computer science is identified through its relationship to the computer: ‘identity remains part of the disciplinary protocol of the field, even if the actual object, the computer, changes

significantly, even unrecognizably, in the course of the years' (Poster 1990, 147). It can be argued then on this basis, that in the humanities a different focal point is taken, emphasising instead the human, even if what it means to be human has changed significantly, alongside new, intimate digital interactions with computers that now intermingle with public health.

Gary Hall (2013) has contended that what has come to be called the digital humanities should not simply be perceived as a bringing together of computing and humanities, as if these were 'equivalent'. He suggests that it is necessary instead to maintain a distinction between digital computing and the humanities. More emphasis has been placed on what 'direct, practical uses computer science can be put to in the humanities' to improve processes and operations. This one-way flow imposes a particular rational logic from computer science on the humanities. There has been less discussion on what 'the humanities themselves bring to the understanding of computing' (Hall, 2013:782). This pattern can be noticed as computing techniques are applied in all manner of human activities across organisations, along with objective goals that seek greater quantitative efficiency. Whereas insights from the humanities applied to better understand these computing activities would lean towards a more qualitative and subjective analysis. The Covid-19 pandemic, and the need for humans to distance from each other, has added further biological and informational complexities to the postdigital contexts that humans now occupy (Jandrić, Knox, Besley, Ryberg, Suoranta and Hayes, 2018). To give a brief example, the proposal that talking robots might be used in care homes to avoid human contact, ease loneliness and improve mental health is a rational route that might: 'relieve some pressures in hospitals and care homes' and 'support existing care systems'. In this case, a robot called 'Pepper is able to engage in and keep up a conversation and can also learn about people's habits and tastes' (Mee, 2020). So far so good on the efficiency front to apply computing to supplement care and minimise risk of viral infection. There are though, some ethical questions to raise about the vulnerability of the human beings in care, their capacity to understand where the data they pass to these robots in conversation is stored, or later utilised. A human companion is at more risk of transferring the virus and a human also listens and uses outcomes from conversations with another human to make rational decisions. There are though differences in how data is memorised by robots, storage capacity and other networks of computing devices, databases and global companies who may be involved.

Examining postdigital humans in the light of George Ritzer's McDonaldisation thesis (Ritzer, 1993/2018) is one way to help to place the arguments above within a more global overview of political economy and wider culture. McDonaldisation provides a view on how humans have come to be valued through digital developments as these have been applied in rational, commercial agendas to increase efficiency and exercise control. Essentially, the route where computing capabilities are simply applied to improve performance standards for humans is an underpinning approach observed

in the values of McDonaldisation (Ritzer, 1993/2018). Adapted from Weber's theory of rationalisation (Weber, 1930), Ritzer argued that the process of McDonaldisation occurs when the principles on which the fast food restaurant are constructed (efficiency, calculability, predictability, control) start to dominate increasing sectors of society, leading to global homogeneity and dehumanisation. Weber's theory, modified in this way by Ritzer, has remained relevant as processes of globalisation and automation through technology have brought new forms of large-scale rationalisation into play, both in physical and online situations. Of particular interest in this chapter are scenarios where rational forms of McDonaldisation can lead also into unexpected, irrational outcomes.

McDonaldisation treats humans more objectively than subjectively, in both organisational practices and related discourse. As this approach has penetrated deeply across institutions, further studies have been undertaken across different sectors, to observe McDonaldisation in new contemporary realities. With digital progress, there are now more irrationalities to observe surrounding rationalisation of human activities through computing techniques. For example, the persistent tendency in recent decades to reorganise education through what sounds like common sense logic in policy discourse, McPolicy, has effectively seen humans writing themselves out of their own roles even amid predictions of a 4th Industrial Revolution that could lead to mass unemployment (Hayes, 2019). Technology has been assigned human characteristics in the policy language, such as an ability to automatically 'enhance' learning within strategy documents that irrationally attribute human labour to machines and not to people (Hayes and Bartholomew, 2015). Some have argued that such reforms reflect a growing disorientation concerning the purposes of education, alongside a rising 'therapy culture' (Furedi, 2004). Yet now, as the Covid-19 pandemic has brought a global biological threat to humanity, spread of this virus has accelerated the use of digital in order to distance. This has taken place too at the very moment when a therapeutic culture would suggest we need to make more human contact with students, not less. Furthermore, whilst it could be pointed out objectively that the Covid-19 threat has simply accelerated the efficiencies of using computing to teach online, a more subjective approach to this through the humanities would notice how this situation plays out differently in each individual human context, depending on a person's 'postdigital positionality' (Hayes, 2020).

This chapter is concerned then, with how postdigital humans may come to be 'valued' in more objective or subjective ways, in McDonaldised society beyond the Covid-19 outbreak. The term 'postdigital humans' will be applied rather loosely throughout, to refer to both human encounters with digital computing, and computing techniques as these encounter human contexts. This is intended to develop arguments concerning 'postdigital positionality' (Hayes, 2020), which refers to individual postdigital contexts and how these play out very differently for people, due to the complex combination of factors involved. Both humans and computers may find themselves objectively

categorised but there is a positionality in each individual encounter, where subjective ‘self-description’ may be more appropriate than objective rationality. After firstly examining how Ritzer extended his original theory to reflect augmented situations that humans now find themselves in, represented as various ‘cages’ of consumption (Ritzer, Jandrić and Hayes, 2018), the chapter will explore new angles of human self-determination. It will consider secondly, if humans who have been routinely subject to rational forms of computer processing and objective evaluation through McDonaldisation are now finding new ways to perceive their postdigital positionality subjectively, perhaps from ‘cages of security’ more than ‘cages of consumption’ since Covid-19 (Hayes, 2020). The ways in which they are developing these routes since the fundamental changes that the pandemic has wrought, leads into some final speculation. There may be signs that society is beginning to move away from more global forms of McDonaldisation based mostly on consumer consumption and where computing techniques are simply applied to humans to improve productivity. If this is the case, bringing concerns from the humanities on what computing really means in our individual lives as postdigital humans is now a pressing matter. Perhaps a more subjective analysis of new forms of postdigital participation may yet prove possible in an equal, but still not equivalent, gathering between humans and machines (Jandrić and Hayes, 2020a).

McDonaldisation across recent decades

Over the decades since Ritzer first wrote about McDonaldisation, his thesis has been applied in various contexts including Higher Education (Hayes and Wynyard, 2002, Ritzer, Jandrić and Hayes, 2018, Hayes, 2019). Ritzer defined five basic dimensions of the McDonaldisation process: efficiency, calculability, predictability, control - as people are substituted by technology, and finally, the irrationality of rationality. Efficiency refers to the processes, structures, policies and regulations that are the means to lead quickly to the end result or goal required. In this understanding, the efficiency of one party may also be dependent on the efficiency of others (Ritzer and Dean, 2019: 187). Calculability is denoted by an emphasis on speed of production or service which stresses quantity of some kind, often at the expense of quality of experience. Predictability concerns the similarity of products across different global locations, but also the predictable behaviours of employees and customers. Control, in relation to technological progress, is noticed as technologies that have dominated human activity, have come to replace humans (Ritzer and Dean, 2019: 187). Lastly, Ritzer argued that the irrationality of rationality often accompanies these other dimensions in a paradoxical manner. For example, the rationality of a fast food restaurant may lead to such popularity, that results in long queues where service is no longer fast (Ritzer and Dean, 2019: 188). In such an example, predictability is then replaced with unpredictability.

In the above described dimensions of McDonaldisation, the human has been ‘valued’ in a particular (objective and rather functional, but also increasingly disposable) manner.

A key dimension of McDonaldisation is the ‘iron cage’ of control, via rationalization. The analysis of how McDonaldisation has worked over recent decades in physical contexts has built on a historical scenario where one form of technology tended to replace another, fairly chronologically due to advances in manufacturing techniques and subsequent unemployment. Well before digital technologies emerged, processes of rationalisation had therefore already accompanied automation. A series of technological revolutions, with the first of these beginning in the mid-18th century, had brought new industrial processes, forms of travel and distribution, production and global communication. Amidst these tangible developments, forms of managerial control that accompanied efficiency, calculability and predictability were relatively easy to spot. However, alongside digital technological change many new and less obvious forms of control have emerged in relation to consumer behaviour and the provision and value of data. Ritzer has described these as giving rise to new ‘cages’.

Recognising humans as moving between various ‘cages’

McDonaldisation is based originally on Weber’s ‘iron cage’ of control. This is the idea that people are trapped but cannot necessarily recognise the figurative iron bars of this rational world. Although once contained within physical sites of bricks and mortar, digital sites have now augmented physical forms of consumer consumption, so that humans can encounter a ‘velvet cage’ within which they may in fact enjoy being trapped, even at the hands of non-human technologies that may threaten human labour and autonomy (Ritzer, Jandrić and Hayes, 2018). Ritzer draws on examples where algorithmic popularity rankings and online reviews further augment the knowledge and data that stores can know about their customers, with algorithms making choices for people and control being increasingly achieved through non-human technologies. Such techniques have enabled a global grip on people that has a much larger reach than the iron cage within physical locations. The velvet cage is less visible as it applies the key principles of McDonaldisation and people are less able to notice how they become subject to these, as ‘prosumers’ (Ritzer, Jandrić and Hayes, 2018). Prosumer refers to the position of a person as both a producer and a consumer, such as when a purchase made online involves also providing reviewer feedback that may help the company sell further products. There is also the rise of prosuming machines, such as blockchain and bitcoin, that can both produce and consume without interventions from human prosumers. Ritzer has argued that these will explode into unprecedented and unpredictable directions in the years to come (Ritzer, Jandrić and Hayes, 2018).

Reflecting once more on ‘human’ as a normative category concerning what ‘self-described’ humans decide to include, or exclude (Fuller and Jandric, 2018), there is perhaps a link with the third form of cage that Ritzer described: ‘the rubber cage’. This cage of rationality possesses rubber bars which can be pulled apart at any time to enable humans to escape (Ritzer, Jandrić and Hayes, 2018). Such imagery has a certain appeal because it plays to the idea from Gary Hall (2013) that computing and humanities are not entirely ‘equivalent’ and so humans might retain some self-determination to act. The rapid changes in computing (whether we can physically see these anymore, or not) proceed simultaneously alongside ongoing changes in humans as they interact with technology. Sometimes an individual may share a very intimate cage with a digital device, sometimes they might pull apart the rubber bars and leave, at least in theory. So, rather than each new technology simply taking over from the last, as an isolated instigator of change that might be rationally deployed, this picture has altered considerably in our postdigital context (Jandrić et. al, 2018). It is somewhat appealing though to imagine humans co-existing as postdigital beings alongside their computing counterparts with a surrounding that is more rubber, than it is iron, or velvet. Rubber has elasticity, flexibility and it can be used to erase. Moving towards an uncertain future, this could be a valuable feature for humans to retain.

A postdigital context

In a postdigital perspective, little of what is technological, or human, is erased as such. All technological changes are argued to remain with humans, whether or not the machines themselves remain in use. This has implications for the category of ‘human’ and what ‘self-described’ humans decide to include, or exclude under this label (Fuller and Jandric, 2018). It affects what people value or not and how they rationalise about human labour and learning. Based on this argument, if no technology is ever perceived to be gone altogether from our lives, then no former, or future, theories about human labour or learning, can be obsolete either (Jandrić and Hayes, 2020a). From a postdigital point of view, both physical and virtual reactions to postdigital change arise as humans respond in new and sometimes irrational processes of self-determination. However, some approaches that emerge as more dominant to define humans can be surprising. Stepping in and out from between the bars of the rubber cage as a human reaction to digital developments within McDonaldised society sounds empowering. Yet the ‘therapeutic’ ethos that has ascended across society and into education seems less so. Humans have become extremely preoccupied with emotional difficulties in a rise of popular therapy that advises people not only on ways to live but also on ‘what to feel’ (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2019: 5). A need to be noticed can materialise in all sorts of ways, such as ‘presenteeism’ where people have become obsessed with working longer and longer hours. Ironically, an irrationality that emerges from this rational approach towards work is the need for a ‘work-life balance’, but even this can become a demand in the workplace (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2019: 108). Therapy culture in

this context can take the form of staff development, wellbeing activities and advice, but these may be accompanied also by surveillance and monitoring (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2019: 117). Personal postdigital responses of self-determination then cut across the virtual and the physical, as a desire to be ‘memorable’ as a person may take the form of a ‘selfie’ (Leone, 2018:44), a tattoo or through oversharing across online forums.

Ultimately though, whether we know it yet or not, we are now in interesting territory that could begin to challenge more traditional global forms of McDonaldisation altogether. In a postdigital society it is increasingly difficult to separate who (or what) is contributing to the ‘viral’ viewpoints that can be seen to spread rapidly across multiple platforms. Peters, Jandrić and McLaren (2020: 3) have referred to ‘viral modernity’, pointing to the association between viral biology on the one hand and information science on the other. They argue that this applies to ‘viral technologies, codes and ecosystems in information, publishing, education and emerging knowledge (journal) systems’. The complex relationships between epidemics, quarantine, and public health management during the Covid-19 pandemic have further revealed this ‘fusion of living and technological systems’ (Peters, Jandrić and McLaren, 2020: 3). During the Covid-19 crisis moral judgements have intermingled with public health advice and misinformation ‘infodemics’ (Peters, Jandrić and McLaren, 2020, Gregory, 2020). This could prove challenging to the ‘predictability’ principle discussed as central to McDonaldisation, so that re-visiting the forms of cages that might now be inhabited by postdigital humans could be a productive way forward.

The postdigital ‘cages’ of Covid-19

During 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic and related lockdown policies dramatically increased the use of online systems to support learning, health, welfare and entertainment. Whilst globally and locally, some people were better positioned than others to access digital devices, platforms, services to acquire associated skills, and to interact through these, for most people there has been a seismic shift in the ways that they now make contact. The Covid-19 lockdown may have physically ‘caged’ human beings, but it has also provided spaces for self-evaluation and self-description. An obvious example of such a space is the variation in design of facemasks that people adopt, to hoodies with built in masks, or even to full hazmat suits for socialising, such as Micrashell ‘a socially responsible solution to safely allow people to interact in close proximity’ (Micrashell, 2020). A ‘cage’ perhaps, but at least one that doubles as a wearable outfit. As humans, we have to choose whether we remain postdigital objects trapped within iron or velvet cages of consumption, or we develop our self-expression as postdigital subjects, as we step in and out of our rubber cages (Ritzer, Jandrić and Hayes, 2018). Gabrielle (2020) argues that:

The shift to a locked-in world has accelerated the acceptance of identity as distinct from physical body or place. We still want to communicate, socialize and play during this time, but have only a digital version to offer. Those constraints are forcing new expressions of selfhood, from the Zoom background used to express a personal interest or make a joke, to the avatars roaming rich, interactive metaverses (Gabrielle, 2020).

It sounds like many humans are running amok then under these new circumstances to trial and adopt a range of backgrounds, appearances, avatars and emoticons, which Gabrielle suggests are now separating identity itself from human bodies and their locations. This is even discussed from an angle where the physical identities of people out on the street are considered more shadowy, and less human, in comparison:

In stark contrast to the masked, distant, de-individuated person we show outside our homes, something a little less than human. There are indications that this redacted version of ourselves is becoming something of a style (Gabrielle, 2020).

These arguments suggest that we may have ‘pivoted’ as people to become more vibrant now as digital humans, than we are as physical humans. Given the long hours that many people are now spending in online locations it seems feasible at first that this may be the case, at least for some groups. There will be those who have gained new skills and might thus be more creative in these varied ways online. It cannot be the case for all though, when globally and locally in different parts of the world, digital access, services, skills and opportunities are far from evenly distributed (Traxler, Smith, Scott and Hayes, 2020, Roy, 2020). The pandemic has revealed that such disparities are the case in developed, as well as less developed parts of the world, with the so-called ‘digital divide’ not only worsened through Covid-19 (Lem, 2020) but now connecting with many other forms of existing disadvantage across society. Whilst social distancing has, for some, involved home-based work, for others it has meant a loss of work, for some it has brought a break from travel, for others more desperate forms of travel (Roy, 2020, Jandrić, et. al, 2020).

Whilst digital divides have always been damaging, there are wider effects due to the spread of digital platforms and data to support all human activities. Perhaps new ‘postdigital cages’ are developing as Covid-19 has revealed those who have capacity to be included in online activities, relating to education, welfare and employment, and those who do not. Therefore, the online subjectivities and playful identities discussed by Gabrielle (2020), although important to observe, are also a partial view. They can distract attention away from structural cages of inequality that have been heightened by the pandemic. It is also important to recall who put many new technological platforms in place quickly during the crisis, and for what potential purposes.

Techlap or techlash

Whilst some people are ‘lapping up’ the tech, as described above, others are examining ‘tech lash’ where there has been a growing reaction to an optimistic embracing of digital technologies developed by either idealistic, or predatory founders of systems and platforms. Ben Williamson (2020) discusses the positioning of such tech players and the powerful global organisations that are forming networks during the pandemic, liaisons that could have sustained effects on education and democracy, well beyond the current crisis:

big tech companies such as Google, Microsoft and Facebook, international organizations including the OECD and UNESCO, as well as a global education industry of edu-businesses, consultancies, investors and technology providers, are coming together to define how education systems should respond to the crisis (Selwyn, Macgilchrist and Williamson, 2020).

Williamson points out the many implications ranging from the data-driven nature of the businesses forming these coalitions, to the consequences for privacy and surveillance, as well as the swift adoption of these platforms at scale, without more vetting procedures. Whilst there are aspirations towards addressing inequalities remotely this could have profound implications in the longer term for systems of public education (Selwyn, Macgilchrist and Williamson, 2020). Levy suggests too that the techlash which existed before the global pandemic arose may also be changing:

Now that our lives are dominated by these giants, we see them as greedy exploiters of personal data and anticompetitive behemoths who have generally degraded society. Before the pandemic, there was every expectation that those companies would be reined in, if not split apart (Levy, 2020).

Amusingly, Levy (2020) asked at the start of lockdown: ‘who knew the techlash was susceptible to a virus?’ It seems then that we could be socially distancing ourselves from techlash too. As humans, our morals may now get weighed against our need for online access to these systems developed by the greedy exploiters of personal data. It becomes necessary to assess then in a Covid-19 stricken McDonaldised society, just how much we do or do not mind being subject to these rational networks of corporate players:

While Big Tech’s misdeeds are still apparent, their actual deeds now matter more to us. We’re using Facebook to comfort ourselves while physically bunkered and social distancing. Google is being conscripted as the potential hub of one of our greatest needs—

Covid-19 testing. Our personal supply chain—literally the only way many of us are getting food and vital supplies—is Amazon (Levy, 2020).

It might be worth avoiding the ‘bleach touted as 'miracle cure' for Covid being sold on Amazon’ (Pilkington, 2020). as we stock up ready for the next lockdown. Perhaps then these many changes during the pandemic have some far-reaching implications for the category of ‘human’ and for what ‘self-described’ humans decide to include, or exclude in this assessment (Fuller and Jandric, 2018), particularly during a global crisis and as we imagine how to bounce back beyond the pandemic.

How will humans bounce back?

An interesting question then is how humans might indeed attempt to bounce back from being caged by Covid-19. It is interesting, certainly for the focus of this chapter, on how postdigital humans may come to be valued in either more objective or subjective ways, in McDonaldised society, as we move forward from the global outbreak. The varied angles that are being taken by individual people, at the same time as those actions undertaken by technology companies, welfare and educational organisations, governments and politicians, suggest that many humans who have long been routinely subject to rational forms of computer processing and objective evaluation through McDonaldisation, are now finding new routes of expression from the security of their homes. These may not always fit the consumer consumption category and its related McDonaldisation principles either. Instead this response could be said to fit more within a model of security, than one of consumption. How people perceive their postdigital positionality (Hayes, 2020) as individual subjects, following the fundamental changes that Covid-19 has wrought, could begin to disrupt and fragment patterns of consumer consumption that have been in place for decades.

At the same time as observing how life changed during lockdown for those in secure homes, the pandemic has revealed how differently other large groups in populations across the world were positioned:

The lockdown worked like a chemical experiment that suddenly illuminated hidden things. As shops, restaurants, factories and the construction industry shut down, as the wealthy and the middle classes enclosed themselves in gated colonies, our towns and megacities began to extrude their working-class citizens — their migrant workers — like so much unwanted accrual. Many driven out by their employers and landlords, millions of impoverished, hungry, thirsty people, young and old, men, women, children, sick people, blind people, disabled people, with nowhere else to go, with no public transport in sight, began a long march home to their villages (Roy, 2020)

Roy was describing fleeing populations in India early in the pandemic in April 2020. Here the rationally imposed lockdown to enforce physical distancing resulted in the exact opposite – a physical compression of people on an unthinkable scale. Whether walking, or sealed into cramped quarters in slums and shanties, worry about catching the virus, though real, was less present in people’s lives than looming unemployment, starvation and the violence of the police (Roy, 2020).

The virus has moved freely along the pathways of trade and international capital, and the terrible illness it has brought in its wake has locked humans down in their countries, their cities and their homes. But unlike the flow of capital, this virus seeks proliferation, not profit, and has, therefore, inadvertently, to some extent, reversed the direction of the flow. It has mocked immigration controls, biometrics, digital surveillance and every other kind of data analytics, and struck hardest — thus far — in the richest, most powerful nations of the world, bringing the engine of capitalism to a juddering halt. Temporarily perhaps, but at least long enough for us to examine its parts, make an assessment and decide whether we want to help fix it, or look for a better engine.

Covid-19 seems then to have challenged the flow of rationality from McDonaldisation with a new run of irrationalities to consider. Roy observes that historically ‘pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew’, adding that:

Coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to “normality”, trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality (Roy, 2020)

Therefore, if the old ‘normality’ is defined in terms of the McDonaldised society that lockdowns has changed forever, perhaps a proliferation of rubber cages will (at least on the surface) be the most noticeable change first. Reported widely across the media, the varying online experiments tried by those in lockdown and discussed by Gabrielle (2020) are just one part of a complex postdigital picture. The scenes of mass migration described by Roy concern people without the same means to experiment with what it means to be a postdigital human. Humans are not occupying equivalent rubber cages, as not only do the digital and human aspects vary for people, other physical and biological factors do too.

It rapidly became apparent that Covid-19 itself did not respect equality or diversity as figures of cases, hospitalisation and death by race/ethnicity were published (CDC, 2020). The Color of Coronavirus project monitors such statistics (APM, 2020). Wide disparities by race seem to be due to numerous reinforcing factors including: workplace exposures, inability to work from home, no access to sick days, geographic areas where people reside, dependence on public transport where the virus is more easily spread, less access to testing, a higher presence of underlying health conditions and receiving delayed medical care, or distrusting health providers. Thus, racial disparities from compounding, elevated risks have been further illuminated by the pandemic (APM, 2020).

Roy has questioned though, whilst a viral pandemic has no morals in and of itself, it may in fact yet provide humans with a 'portal', 'a gateway between one world and the next'. Perhaps so, but perhaps this is not actually a question of moving from one normal to another. In these circumstances it is worth considering what passes for 'normal' anyway (Fuller and Jandrić, 2019). Perhaps deliberation on a 'new normal' might be accompanied by discussion on more dynamic 'new normals' that have befallen each of us in different ways. Individual or group cages vary depending on the postdigital circumstances within which each person finds themselves. So, it is worth reflecting on Ritzer's 'cages' and whether some may be more hybrid in construction (iron, velvet and/or rubber) and also multifaceted (as the humans occupying these encounter postdigital systems and Covid-19 cages to varying degrees).

For example, alongside stark reports of physical loss and human grief in the news media, incongruous attempts to recreate life as it was before lockdown in 'Mumdonalds' Happy Meals to replace routine, family fast food experiences (Abernethy, 2020) can be observed. The creation of 'social distancing logos' by a group of companies including McDonald's, Coca-Cola, Audi and Volkswagen (Valinsky, 2020) is also not surprising, when predictability is after all, one of the key principles of McDonaldisation theory, alongside efficiency, calculability, control and the 'irrationality of rationality' (Ritzer, Jandrić & Hayes, 2018). However, lockdown has taken very different shapes for families and individuals. Comments on social media, indicate that for some people this just represents a fun take on a tedious process, whilst others argue that 'social distancing logos' assist a global effort by reminding people to distance from each other. Further viewpoints expressed concerns that these icons trivialise a serious matter (Valinsky, 2020). Whichever perspective appeals, the production of static logos still plays its part in reinforcing a rational, commercial generalization. Social distancing becomes reified within McDonaldised marketing, inferring that it is experienced by everyone in a similar, predictable way. As such, many more individual aspects of the 'cages of self-isolation', including the varied national lockdown timelines, separation from loved ones, personal grief, loss, quarantine, migration, and/or economic hardships experienced by so many people across the globe are rendered less visible (Hayes, 2020).

Digital humanities or a gathering of postdigital humans?

There is also an argument that Covid-19 is now speeding up the process of robots replacing humans which raises questions on where matters of identity and value will sit in the coming years. If computer science takes the lead on such developments (Poster, 1990) and matters of the humanities are swallowed up in this disciplinary logic, then perhaps the human will take a back seat (just as they might in a self-driving car):

People usually say they want a human element to their interactions but Covid-19 has changed that," says Martin Ford, a futurist who has written about the ways robots will be integrated into the economy in the coming decades (Thomas, 2020).

Changes to consumer preferences are a serious consideration that some suggest are rapidly opening new opportunities for automation. From robot cleaners for schools and offices, for example, to fast-food chains like McDonald's testing robots as cooks and servers. As Covid-19 accelerates a shift away from humans and toward machines, there are some aspects of this automation that seem to be warmly welcomed to keep critical services running and spare us from disease (Thomas, 2020). Chatbot girlfriends and practices of seeking romance or friendship from artificial intelligence (AI) is another potential route for removing human partnerships and replacing these with computing alternatives (Olson, 2020). Then there are the changes to transport and the virus anxiety that has disrupted businesses and supply chains. It seems that suddenly, autonomous transport and the future of delivery is getting a boost because this 'helps customers reduce physical contact and address labour shortages caused by lingering quarantines and travel restrictions' (Bloomberg News, 2020).

Interesting too is that such automation is not only affecting manual labour. If anything, the broad term of 'key workers' has lifted some professions to the forefront, alongside the value already placed on skilled health workers. Security staff to operate covid-19 test centres and shop workers to keep shelves in supermarkets stocked are two such examples. Alongside this focus, Gabrielle (2020) reports that many large companies are 'aggressively employing AI solutions', for example, 'Facebook and Google have expanded automated moderation, while PayPal used chatbots for 65% of customer inquiries in recent weeks, a record for the firm'. (Gabrielle, 2020). Indeed, the picture that emerges currently seems to be richly postdigital as often augmented solutions seem to be adopted with humans not about to bow out just yet:

Those lucky enough to retain their jobs may face a very different work environment in which they are forced to collaborate with robots and be treated as an increasingly mechanized system themselves. Walmart greeters will stand side-by-side with automated floor-scrubbers, and Amazon warehouse workers — old-hands at human-robot collaboration thanks to the company's acquisition of Kiva Systems — must adapt to being managed more like their pallet-ferrying co-workers, with temperatures monitored by thermal cameras (Gabrielle, 2020).

Ultimately, what remains to be seen are the policies that will emerge alongside these changes to demonstrate how postdigital humans are expected to collaborate in the workplace. Will humans and their computing counterparts be valued, in more objective, or subjective ways, in McDonaldised society following the Covid-19 outbreak? Whether society is starting to move away from more traditional global forms of McDonaldisation, based mostly on the rationality of consumer consumption, where computing techniques are simply applied to humans to improve productivity alone, is important to debate. The rationality that placed humans in iron cages was based on the development of new industrial technologies that replaced the old ones in a series of 'revolutions' (Jandrić, 2020a). As the digital economy has provided ways to augment industry, entertainment and the high street, many humans have found their place in more comfortable velvet cages. However, at a time when humanity has been forced to occupy Covid-19 cages, there is a 'fusion of living and technological systems' (Peters, Jandrić and McLaren, 2020:3). In a postdigital society it is increasingly difficult to separate who (or what) is contributing to the cages occupied by humans. Now that there are complex links between epidemics, quarantine, and public health management, these have caused moral and ethical judgements and public health advice to begin to alter approaches towards automation.

Security, consumption or both?

How people perceive their postdigital positionality (Hayes, 2020) may therefore be changing somewhat from cages of consumer consumption towards cages of security given new biological risks. This is raising issues with regard to surveillance as the number of devices and different forms of data gather in our lives. Whilst humans may be distancing from each other, these technologies are becoming ever more intimately involved with us. Once when computing was a specialised field it was less of an issue, but now networked and ubiquitous computing have altered our society to become increasingly 'data-driven'. From consumer habits to educational outcomes and behavioural observation, the ability to film, record, create and encrypt human data, as well as to decide matters for humans through algorithms, has brought privacy to the forefront. Whilst the Internet of Things (IoT) has enabled all manner of devices to support humans in the home as they operate appliances or seek to monitor who visits their doorstep, there are concerns that data-collection is increasingly seamless

between devices and consumer data remains open to industry abuse. A confusing mass of information in the form of a 'data smog' is concealing and conflating information now about multiple individuals (Mortier, Haddadi, Henderson, McAuley, Crowcroft and Crabtree, 2020).

Moving from an individual or home level towards a broader monitoring of citizens in general, the installation of close circuit cameras for safety on the street has long received criticism and support. Now that automatic facial recognition (AFR) software has found its place into towns and institutions there has been both backlash and even removal of these technologies. In a recent landmark case in the UK, the use of AFR Locate was argued to have breached human rights when biometric data was analysed without the knowledge or consent of the individual concerned. The court upheld that there was 'no clear guidance on where AFR Locate could be used and who could be put on a watchlist, a data protection impact assessment was deficient and the police force did not take reasonable steps to find out if the software had a racial or gender bias'. (Rees, 2020).

Yet just as such cases may be bringing concerns from the humanities to bear on what computing really means in each of our lives as postdigital humans, Covid-19 has led to demand for 'webcams to enable customers to check online to see how busy the high streets are, in a bid to help with social distancing' (Beardmore, 2020). There are concerns too regarding the pros and cons of track-and-trace apps and invasion of privacy (Amnesty International, 2020). Just as postdigital humans are adapting to working online more autonomously, 'tattleware' software, such as Interguard and Sneek are being bought by companies to increase surveillance on employees, taking photos of workers as often as once a minute (Gabrielle, 2020). Perhaps the old iron cage of McDonaldisation has now moved itself online. If this is the case, new forms of postdigital participation, rather than McDonaldisation, may go on being contested for some time to come, demonstrating a less than equal gathering between machines and humans.

Conclusion: Equal but not equivalent

In summary, it could be argued that a machine or a device performing a task that a human might otherwise have completed is undertaking something 'equal' in nature, e.g. if the end result is that a self-driving car delivers a human passenger at a given destination, just as the same human would arrive at the same destination having driven the car themselves. However, this does not mean that seemingly equal results can be considered as identical. Depending on whether this example is viewed from a computing perspective, or from within the humanities, different properties of such a situation may be considered. In a postdigital analysis it can be noticed how even autonomous, or semi-autonomous digital technologies, retain their connections to human rationality. This may be via programming and design, related to the data on humans that these devices, apps or platforms carry, or

more broadly connected to rational human aims and values described in policies for situations where technologies are utilised. It may perhaps be argued then that our digital counterparts are equal to some extent but not equivalent.

To play with language in this way also demonstrates why qualitative as well as quantitative perspectives are needed. The rationality of McDonaldisation described by Ritzer in terms of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control may be achieved via technology, but this is also supported through the discourse that accompanies its utilisation in any given situation.

McDonaldisation, as a large enduring social theory, has demonstrated how patterns of rationality have been sustained in different ways over decades across global, political, economies and popular cultures. The homogeneity that Ritzer first observed could also be noticed in augmented ways, as digital developments enabled online activities to supplement the sameness of companies on the high street of every city (Ritzer, Jandrić and Hayes, 2018).

Now the spread of Covid-19 has revealed a mass of postdigital human subjectivities from across the globe (Peters, et.al, 2020, Jandrić and Hayes, 2020b). The starkly uneven human access to digital devices, skills and services revealed is a reminder that in postdigital society there are also huge numbers of humans and communities who remain pre-digital or semi-digital too (Traxler, Smith, Scott and Hayes, 2020). Then there are the more objective treatments of humans through surveillance technologies and also the call for more of these to support our fight against the pandemic.

Perhaps we are witnessing something of a collision between the subjective nature of the humanities and the objective nature of digital computing. If so, it is a battle with a viral umpire keeping score just now as the rationalities of McDonaldisation fragment or begin to reform. As humanity looks beyond the pandemic and contemplates the gathering of machines and humans that has protected us, it will be important to check what may have been erased from us at the same time.

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Index words

Postdigital, positionality, human, computing, humanities, McDonaldisation, rationality, irrationality, efficiency, calculability, predictability, control, cage, objective, subjective, Covid-19, pandemic, lockdown, consumption, data, artificial intelligence, security, techlash, privacy, surveillance